Inherent Strategic Ambiguity between Objectives and Actions: Russia’s ‘Information War’

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Keywords—Russia, Ukraine, Syria, ambiguity, information war, strategic communications, strategic communication

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Abstract

The concept and practice of strategic ambiguity have long been the subject of scholarly inquiry. In an attempt to understand how it can be used in strategic communications (SC), this article explores Russia’s conceptualisation and implementation of ‘information war’ by adopting a dialectic approach. First, it examines the Kremlin’s actions in Syria and Ukraine through the traditional approach to strategy as an act of navigation. Second, it takes an opposite framework, approaching the Kremlin’s ‘information war’ as a strategy of wayfinding (strategy without design). Finally, based on the dialectic synthesis of these two approaches, the conclusion offers several recommendations for the practice of SC in general.
Introduction: Strategic Ambiguity in Strategic Communications

The concept and practice of strategic ambiguity (SA) have long been the subject of scholarly inquiry. One of the most fruitful discussions has been in the field of business studies. Introduced by Eric M. Eisenberg in the 1980s, the concept of SA has been approached as a strategy in organisational communications to achieve different goals, such as enabling multiple interests, delegating authority, or resolving conflicts within or between organisations. Another important field that has devoted much attention to the idea of SA is international relations—from game-theory strategists who integrated ambiguity in their models to policy analysts who used the concept of SA to explain foreign policies of different states, such as that between the US and both China and Taiwan, or the policy of Japan towards the Indo-Pacific.

Eisenberg uses the term SA to refer to ‘instances where individuals [or organisations] use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals’. While the concept was developed (and is still frequently perceived) as an opposite of clarity, this is not entirely true. ‘Clarity exists’, argues Eisenberg, when ‘(1) an individual has an idea; (2) he or she encodes the idea into language; and (3) the receiver understands the message as it was intended by the source’. Therefore, clarity is only a degree of

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6. Ibid.
competence of a communicator who seeks to make his or her idea/goal clear to the receiver. SA, however, exists when: (1) an individual has a clear idea; (2) he or she encodes it into ambiguous language; (3) the receiver fosters multiple interpretations about the message communicated by the source. In pursuit of clarity, a communicator must ‘take into account the possible interpretive contexts which may be brought to bear on the message by the receiver and attempt to narrow the possible interpretations’.\(^7\) However, if a communicator seeks to achieve SA, he or she must use the same interpretive context to broaden the scope of potential interpretations by the receiver as much as possible.

According to the most basic (and reductively simple) understanding of strategy, SA comprises three foundational and interdependent elements: ends, ways, and means.\(^8\) Consequently, SA has three basic dimensions: goal ambiguity, ways ambiguity, and means ambiguity.\(^9\) Strategic goal ambiguity implies communications that purposefully create plurality of interests and meanings that the target audience attributes to the goal of the communicator. Strategic ways ambiguity refers to the intentionally generated interpretations by the target audience in regard to the ways by which the communicator intends to achieve his or her goals. Finally, strategic means ambiguity suggests purposefully created plurality of interpretations about the means by which the communicator seeks to achieve his or her goals.

This leads to two important observations about the character and nature of SA. First, SA is not a goal by itself but a purposefully created diversity of inconclusive interpretations by audiences as a means to achieve the communicator’s strategic goal. Second, due to the interdependent nature of these three elements of strategy, the three dimensions of SA are interwoven as well. Ambiguity about goals generates ambiguity about means and ways, ambiguity about means creates ambiguity about goals.

\(^7\) Ibid.


and ways, and so on. This complex nature of SA is frequently discussed (even if implicitly) in the analysis of different cases studies, such as US Taiwan policy\textsuperscript{10} or Russian policies in the post-Soviet space.\textsuperscript{11}

In an attempt to understand how SA can be used in strategic communications (SC), it is important to understand what SC entails. On the one hand, neither the term nor the concept of SC has a unified definition. On the other, a review of existing approaches suggests that it entails ‘a coordinated/coherent use of all means of communication (words, images, actions) to influence targeted audiences in pursuit of political interests’.\textsuperscript{12} SC not only ‘encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’, but also does so as ‘a holistic approach’ that is ‘based on values and interests’.\textsuperscript{13}

Combining this understanding of SC with the broader concept of SA produces two important observations. First, SA can be used in the practice of SC, as far as it is in the interest of the strategic communicator to generate ambiguity about his or her goals, means, and/or ways among the targeted audiences. In this case, he or she will coherently use all means of communication (encompassing everything he or she does) purposefully generating SA in pursuit of select objectives in a contested environment. Second, since both strategic ambiguity and strategic communications are rooted in the idea of strategy, they both imply the existence of a strategic goal, which a strategic communicator seeks to achieve by deliberately using SA in his or her SC. These observations raise one of the most acute questions for the field of SC: what is the role of SA in SC?

To answer this question, this article explores Russia’s SC—more precisely, the Russian alternative of SC—‘information war’ (IW). This exploration consists of four main parts. Since the notion of strategy is essential for

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{10} Boon and Sworn, ‘Strategic Ambiguity and the Trumpian Approach’; Chang-Lia and Fang, ‘The Case for Maintaining Strategic Ambiguity’.
\bibitem{13} Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, \textit{Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology} (Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, June 2019), p. 46.
\end{thebibliography}
both SC and SA, the first part investigates the concept of IW as Russia’s approach to SC through the traditional approach to strategy-making as ‘a deliberate, planned, and purposeful activity’. The second part examines Russia’s intervention in Syria and invasion of Ukraine through this conceptual prism, offering some interpretations of the Kremlin’s use of SA in its IW. The third part addresses the same challenge through the opposite approach to strategy-making as a process characterised by a consistency of actions that ‘emerge non-deliberately through a profusion of local interventions directed towards dealing with immediate concerns’. Finally, based on the dialectic synthesis of these two approaches, the conclusion not only sheds light on the role of SA in SC, but also offers a deeper understanding of SC in general.

Russia’s Information War as a Deliberate Use of Strategic Ambiguity in Strategic Communications

Since the term SC is a fruit of Western thinking, its absence in Russian professional and conceptual discourse is not surprising. While some Russian scholars have been following the Western theoretical developments in the field of SC, the term is neither used in Russia’s official documents nor prevalent in the country’s wider academic debates. Instead, the closest counterpart to Western SC in Russia is the concept of IW.

One of the first and main advocates of the concept of IW in Russian academic and professional discourse was Professor Igor Panarin. A former KGB officer, educated in political science and psychology, Panarin is a full

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15 Ibid., p. 5.
18 Fridman, “‘Information War’ as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications’.
member of the Military Academy of Science of the Russian Federation who holds numerous senior advisory and coordinating positions in the Russian political system. Since the mid 1990s he has published extensively on the topic, arguing that information has always been the most important domain in both domestic politics and international relations. In his words:

Since antiquity, the stability of the political system of any country has relied on how quickly and completely the political elites receive information (e.g., about [possible] danger), and how quickly they respond […] Political activity [by definition] is an informational struggle over the control of the minds of the elites and [other] social groups.19

After analysing the history of international relations, Panarin claims that the ‘informational struggle’ has consistently played the most decisive role in achieving the desired goals of different actors.20 He calls this struggle information war:

A type of confrontation between parties, represented by the use of special (political, economic, diplomatic, military and other) methods [based on different] ways and means that influence the informational environment of the opposing party [while] protecting their own [environment], in order to achieve clearly defined goals. [Therefore] the major dimensions for waging informational-psychological confrontations [are] political, diplomatic, financial-economic, [and] military.21

21 Panarin and Panarina, Informatsionnaya voyna i mir, pp. 20–21.
According to many IW advocates in Russia, the effectiveness of actions (political, diplomatic, financial-economic, and military) in IW ‘is measured not by their impact in the real world, but by their influence on the virtual information dimension’.\(^{22}\) In other words, IW seeks to generate an informational impact from real world activities to influence targeted audiences for political benefits. Therefore, it seems right to argue that while in the West ‘the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects, using words, images, actions and non-actions in the national interest’ is conceptualised as SC,\(^ {23}\) in Russia the same practice is conceptualised as IW.

In an attempt to understand Russian strategic frameworks in general and the concept of IW in particular, it is important, as Mark Galeotti puts it, ‘to think in Russian—in other words, to understand Moscow’s

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motivations, and its understanding of the current situation’. Following Galeotti’s suggestions, it is important to adopt a traditional Russian approach to strategy that has always been understood as the art of combining different elements to achieve desired goals in the specific context of a given situation. Therefore, Figure 1 offers a suitable strategic framework for a better understanding of the strategy behind Russia’s IW.

Russia’s Understanding of Its Geopolitical Situation

Unfortunately, a detailed analysis of Russia’s understanding of its geopolitical situation is beyond the scope of this article. However, from a review of official documents, doctrines, and strategies published by the Russian government and the existing literature on this topic, it is possible to make several generalised observations.

The Kremlin divides the world into three main clusters of geopolitical actors. The first cluster includes Russia’s main geopolitical adversaries—the United States and the European Union (and NATO as a political-military alliance that overlaps the US and the EU, and is used as a tool of power projection). While none of them is considered by the Kremlin to be a direct military threat per se (due to Russia’s nuclear arsenal), the general perception in the Kremlin is that ‘the United States does not intend to tolerate an independent Russian foreign policy’ and ‘the EU does not intend to tolerate Russia’s domestic political order’. Therefore,

24 Mark Galeotti, Hybrid War or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right (Prague: Mayak Intelligence, 2016), p. 76.
27 ‘Russian Strategic Documents’, Russia Matters, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School [accessed 4 April 2023].
Moscow sees both as the main adversaries that obstruct the Kremlin from pursuing Russian national interests (international and domestic).

The second cluster of geopolitical actors includes those perceived by the Kremlin as ‘strategic partners’ or ‘partners of convenience’. While the extent and field of ‘partnership’ can vary, this cluster usually comprises China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and other regional powers which, driven by their own national interests and convoluted relations with the West, seek a degree of partnership with Russia (and, occasionally, are also interested in weakening the global positions of the US and/or EU).30

Finally, there is the rest of the world (RoW). Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia lost partners not only in the West but also in its own neighbourhood. However, as senior Russian strategist Dmitri Trenin argues, ‘geopolitically, it is isolated yet free, [as] Russia remains able to think and act globally’31 in pursuit of its national interests. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reinforced the diplomatic isolation of the Kremlin. However, Moscow understands that it is not entirely alone. Many countries around the world, due to either their own national interests or their grievances against the West, ‘do not side with Ukraine and its democratic hopes’,32 and, therefore, are seen by the Kremlin as potential economic, diplomatic, or military partners.

Consequently, the Kremlin’s understanding of a geopolitical situation can be summarised in three dimensions: confrontation with the West’s main global players (US/EU/NATO), seeking closer cooperation with strategic partners (global and regional), and competing for the RoW in pursuit of Russian national interests. When viewed through the prism of IW (as a holistic framework that shapes the relations between real actions conducted by the Kremlin and information they generate), this understanding of the geopolitical situation predefines three main target

30 Ahmed Charai, ‘New World Disorder: What the UN Vote on Russia Really Reveals about Global Politics’, Jerusalem Strategic Tribune, April 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
31 Trenin, ‘It’s Time to Rethink Russia’s Foreign Policy Strategy’.
32 Charai, ‘New World Disorder’.
audiences of Russia’s IW: the West (US/EU/NATO), Russia’s strategic partners, and the RoW.

Russia’s National Interests

While Russia’s official national interests are defined in its National Security Strategy, a detailed analysis of their interpretations and how they translate into reality is beyond the scope of this paper. On the basis of the existing analytical literature, however, it seems right to aggregate Russian national interests under a unified conceptual umbrella of ‘Making Russia Great Again’. Since this title can be easily scrutinised for its reductive oversimplicity, analysing the way it translates into strategic objectives can provide necessary clarity and intricacy.

Strategic Objectives

The Kremlin’s strategic objectives are conveyed in the context of its perception of the geopolitical situation and are shaped by its national interest of ‘Making Russia Great Again’. However, ‘making’ and ‘great’ do not necessarily imply the Kremlin’s desire to turn Russia into an objectively great power. The Kremlin understands that Russia lacks the economic, demographic, societal, scientific, and technological conditions required to join the exclusive club of great powers. Instead, ‘making’ suggests the Kremlin seeks to establish Russia as a great disrupter that challenges the power of the members of this club (mainly its geopolitical adversaries, the US/EU/NATO), thus bridging the gap between them and Russia. And ‘great’ suggests convincing these members (as well as Russia’s strategic partners and the RoW), that ‘a state does not have to be a great power that is at parity in all realms with the United States,

34 Stoner, Russia Resurrected, p. 5.
35 Trenin, ‘It’s Time to Rethink Russia’s Foreign Policy Strategy’.
Europe or China—but it can be good enough to dramatically alter the balance of power in a new global order.’\textsuperscript{36}

Finally, ‘again’ implies a restoration of Russia’s status and the respect it received in the past from both friends and foes, rather than a restoration (ideological, territorial, economic) of the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire. While Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can be seen as a manifestation of Vladimir Putin’s neo-imperialism in an attempt to resurrect the Russian/Soviet Empire, it can be equally interpreted as another of Putin’s ill-conceived and self-serving endeavours. According to Galeotti, a swift invasion of Ukraine could have allowed Putin to write himself into history as a gatherer of Russian lands, ‘so he can find a loyal successor […] and be so celebrated […] that he would be bulletproof’ in his retirement.\textsuperscript{37}

When viewed through the prism of IW, this understanding of ‘Making Russia Great Again’ translates into the following strategic objective: shifting and shaping (as well as disrupting) global order in pursuit of Russian national interests.

Operational Situation

The Kremlin’s interpretation of an operational situation feeds into its understanding of the geopolitical situation, which is characterised by adversarial relations with the US/EU/NATO, selective partnerships with several regional/global powers, and open competition for the RoW. Therefore, Russia’s understanding of its operational situation is shaped by three main factors. The first and most important is the state of US/EU/NATO internal cohesion and resilience that generates the ability of the US/EU/NATO to exercise their own SC effectively. The second is the readiness of Russia’s strategic partners to navigate their countries in a direction that benefits Russia’s national interests at the expense of the

\textsuperscript{36} Stoner, \textit{Russia Resurrected}, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{37} Mark Galeotti in ‘No Way Out?’, \textit{Putin} № 13, BBC podcast, 14 December 2022.
interests of the US/EU/NATO. Finally, the third factor is the ability and the interest of members of the RoW, if not to cooperate with Russia, then at least to challenge the US/EU/NATO and their values and interests.

Operational Objectives

The Kremlin’s operational objectives are formulated in the context of its interpretation of the operational situation and are shaped by strategic objectives. Therefore, operational objectives would serve shifting and shaping (as well as disrupting) global order by undermining US/EU/NATO internal cohesion, resilience, and ability to exercise SC, while strengthening Russia’s strategic partnerships and its ability to compete for the RoW.

Tactical Situation

The Kremlin is not as isolated as it is assumed by many Western experts. It maintains a very strong presence in Africa,\textsuperscript{38} flirts with many different actors in the Middle East,\textsuperscript{39} and consolidates alliances in Latin America.\textsuperscript{40} The Kremlin understands that every tactical situation in which Russia finds itself in any particular case is different, depending on regional and local political, economic, and security conditions, ethnic and religious compositions, and local history and culture. Therefore, the Kremlin’s interpretation of each tactical situation will be shaped by these factors, as well as the state of SC conducted by the US/EU/NATO in the region and the Kremlin’s ability to exercise its influence in pursuit of its own interests.

\textsuperscript{38} Raphael Parens, ‘The Wagner Group’s Playbook in Africa: Mali’, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 18 March 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

\textsuperscript{39} Andrew S. Weiss and Jasmine Alexander-Greene, ‘What’s Driving Russia’s Opportunistic Inroads with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arabs’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 October 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

\textsuperscript{40} Armando Chaguaceda and Adriana Boersner Herrera, ‘Russia in Latin America: The Illiberal Confluence’, LSE Blog, 28 June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
Tactical Objectives

To achieve operational objectives in the context of a given tactical situation, the Kremlin’s tactical objectives may include: regime change/support; deterrence, subversion, or coercion of local political power; persuasion to resist cooperation with the West and/or strengthen cooperation with Russia. The choice of particular tactical objective will be affected by the Kremlin’s interpretation of how the tactical (local) situation can be shaped in pursuit of operational and strategic objectives.

Actions

According to Russian experts, action in IW can be grouped into two interconnected clusters. The first consists of so-called ‘military means’ deployed as a means in IW—actions (as a part of armed conflict or not) conducted by the military for their information-psychological influence on target audiences that are not directly involved in the conflict, rather than for purely military goals on the battlefield.\(^{41}\) In addition to their traditional purpose of winning wars and conflicts, many Russian experts argue that armed forces can be used as a means to support political-diplomatic, economic, informational, and other goals simply by their presence or by the demonstration of military potential.\(^{42}\) Moreover, even a deployment of armed forces in an armed conflict in one theatre can be used as a means of IW in another, focusing on a target audience that is not directly involved in the first conflict. As some Russian experts argue, one of the achieved objectives of Russia’s military intervention in Syria in 2015 was ‘to replace the Ukrainian crisis in the information domain

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41 Fridman, “‘Information War’ as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications”, p. 50.
42 Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov, ‘Strategicheskoye sderzhivaniye i natsional’naya bezopasnost’ Rossii na sovremennom etape’ [The Strategic Deterrence and National Security of Russia in the Modern Age], Voennaya mys’ N° 3 (2012): 16.
with the Syrian one, and direct the energy of the active elements [target audiences of this intervention] in another direction.\textsuperscript{43}

The second cluster of possible action in IW includes ‘non-military means’—economic, diplomatic, and other non-military actions intended to achieve a certain information-psychological impact on a target audience. According to Vladimir Serebryanikov and Aleksandr Kapko, a retired lieutenant general and a former high-level diplomat who were among the first to write on this topic in the early 2000s, the cluster of ‘non-military means’ includes eight main dimensions: political-diplomatic, legal, economic, ideological-psychological, informational, humanitarian, intelligence, and public (non-governmental).\textsuperscript{44} When examining these activities as a part of IW, it is important to remember that their contribution is valued not necessarily for ‘their intended effect in the real world, but also—and more importantly—for their potential to achieve desired goals in the information dimension’.\textsuperscript{45} While in the real world the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline was an economic project, it was also a ‘non-military’ economic tool in Russia’s IW against the West.\textsuperscript{46} Another example is the Kremlin’s SPUTNIK-V vaccine diplomacy—using the vaccine as a means of IW to influence target audiences while having neither the capability nor the intent to deliver the promised vaccines.\textsuperscript{47}

Consequently, to achieve its tactical objectives, the Kremlin can use either or both ‘military’ and ‘non-military’ means to shape and shift the tactical situation that would, in turn, change operational and geopolitical situations by influencing three main target audiences of the Kremlin’s


\textsuperscript{45} Fridman, “Information War” as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications’, p. 48.


\textsuperscript{47} Vera Michlin-Shapir and Olga Khvostunova, The Rise and Fall of Sputnik-V: How the Kremlin Used the Coronavirus Vaccine as a Tool of Information Warfare, Institute of Modern Russia, October 2021 [accessed 4 April 2023].
IW: the US/EU/NATO, Russia’s strategic partners, and the RoW. These relations between a blend of ‘military’ and ‘non-military’ actions and national interests has been best described by two Russian military strategists, Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov:

Under the conditions of the globalisation of world processes, the enormous economic superiority of leading powers and the heavy financial dependence of the majority of the other countries on them [the leading powers], there is no objective need to conduct large-scale wars. Such wars are not expected because of the threat of catastrophic consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, on the one hand, and on the other—because new ways and means have been found of achieving political and strategic objectives by conducting local wars [and] conflicts; by political, economic [and] informational pressure; and by subversive actions inside the adversary state.48

This conceptual framework of Russia’s IW (Figure 2) should be considered with one important caveat: it has not been articulated in any official document, manual, or doctrine. Instead, it is conceptualised based on the examination of official documents, extensive literature published both in Russia and the West, and the analysis of Russia’s actions in the real world and how they serve the Kremlin’s assumed or declared goals. Therefore, it is impossible to claim that the Kremlin’s implementation of IW is proactively guided by this framework.

Instead, this framework attempts to make sense of Russian strategy by identifying consistencies between the Kremlin’s words and actions, based on theoretical conceptualisations of their place and role in IW. It approaches the Kremlin’s IW strategy-making as ‘a deliberate, planned,

and purposeful activity that pursues the long-term (strategic) goal of ‘making Russia great again’ by exercising (comprehensive) influence on three predefined audiences—the US/EU/NATO, Russia’s strategic partners, and the RoW.

Moreover, this conceptualisation of Russia’s IW exposes the inherent ambiguity between its objectives and actions, purposefully generated by the Kremlin to maximise the desired impact on target audiences. There are three main conditions that characterise SA in SC. The communicator must have a clear aim, which he or she encodes into ambiguous language (of words and actions in SC), thus broadening the scope of possible interpretations by the receiver (target audience). In other words, the communicator must have a clear strategy of how to achieve a desired influence on the target audience in a way that purposefully generates ambiguity about the communicator’s ends, means, and ways. While the concept of IW recreates a clear picture of the Kremlin’s strategic goals, it also demonstrates the inherent SA generated by its words and actions. As discussed, both ‘military’ and ‘non-military’ means are used in IW not necessarily for their direct impact (political, diplomatic, financial-economic, or military) in the real world, but due to their indirect and less articulated potential to influence different target audiences. This inherent capacity of IW to generate SA manifested itself best in Russia’s 2015 intervention in Syria and 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Strategic Ambiguity in Information War: From Syria to Ukraine

The nature of relations between Russia’s military and its civilian leader—whether a tsar, a general secretary, or a president—has been widely discussed in the West. By focusing on different characteristics of Russian political-military culture, most existing studies examine the role and place of the military in Russia through the prism of Western models of civil-military relations. This article, however, takes a different approach. According to the conceptualisation of Russia’s IW, military actions can be conducted not only for their immediate impact in the real world, but also due to their capacity to influence target audiences, which are not

50 As discussed in the Introduction.

necessarily involved in the conflict. Therefore, in an attempt to examine the complex contribution of the ‘military means’ to the Kremlin’s IW, it argues that the purpose of the Russian military extends beyond the narrow Western understanding of ‘military means’ as ‘the capacity to create military power’.

The 2015 Intervention in Syria and the Kremlin’s Information War

The Kremlin has been involved in the Syrian crisis from the beginning, by supporting the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in two vital dimension—diplomatic and military. In addition to using its position in the UN Security Council to block attempts to impose comprehensive sanctions on Syria, the Kremlin continued to provide military assistance to the troubled Syrian military. From 2011 to 2015 Russia delivered an estimated $ 983 million in weapons and military equipment to Syria. Despite international criticism the Kremlin persisted with its support, claiming that all deliveries had been carried out ‘in accordance with international law, in compliance with the procedures and within the framework of existing contracts’.

Putin’s decision to deploy forces in September 2015 did not surprise those who closely followed Russian military affairs in the region. Weeks before his official declaration of the intervention, there were reports of the Kremlin’s decision to repair the airbase near the port city

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54 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Arms Transfers Database [accessed 4 April 2023].

55 Mariya Yefimova, Ivan Safronov, and Yelena Chernenko, ‘Rossiya ukreplila Bashara Asada, granatometami i beteerami’ [Russia Reinforced Bashar al-Assad with Grenade Launchers and APCs], Kommersant, 9 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].
of Latakia,\textsuperscript{56} of the transfer of military hardware and equipment from Russia to Syria,\textsuperscript{57} of the movement of the Black Sea Fleet warships into the eastern Mediterranean,\textsuperscript{58} and even about Russian troops already fighting alongside pro-Assad forces.\textsuperscript{59}

Moreover, from the beginning of its intervention in Syria, the Kremlin paid careful attention to integrating this military operation into its IW. From Putin’s pretentious call to arms—‘we must join efforts […] and create a genuinely broad international coalition against terrorism’—in his speech to the UN General Assembly just days before the deployment of Russian forces in Syria,\textsuperscript{60} up to the unexpected announcement of ‘mission accomplished’ almost six months later,\textsuperscript{61} the words and actions of the Russian leadership resembled more a well-staged theatre performance than a military attempt to secure the regime of al-Assad. After all, Russia was involved in the Syrian conflict before September 2015, and it remains deeply involved, as in December 2017 Russia’s defence minister Sergei Shoigu announced that Russia was going to establish a permanent presence at its Syrian naval (Tartus) and air (Hmeimim) bases.\textsuperscript{62} While the 2022 invasion of Ukraine forced the Kremlin to withdraw some of its troops from Syria to reinforce its units in Ukraine, this did not end in a complete withdrawal. In 2022, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the Russian Air Force conducted nearly

\begin{thebibliography}{9}  
\bibitem{56} Aleksey Nikol’skiy, ‘Rossiyskiye voyennyye pomogut otremontirovat’ v Sirii prichal i vzletnuyu polosu’ [The Russian Military Will Help to Repair the Wharf and the Runway in Syria], \textit{Vedomosti}, 14 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].
\bibitem{57} Alec Luhn, ‘Russia Sends Artillery and Tanks to Syria as Part of Continued Military Buildup’, \textit{Guardian}, 14 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].
\bibitem{58} Sam LaGrone, ‘Russian Warships in Eastern Mediterranean to Protect Russian Strike Fighters in Syria’, \textit{USNI News}, 5 October 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].
\bibitem{59} Telegraph Foreign Staff, ‘Russian Troops “Fighting alongside Assad’s Army against Syrian Rebels”’, \textit{Telegraph}, 2 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].
\end{thebibliography}
4000 air strikes in Syria, maintaining its presence in the country and the image of a global power fighting the Islamic State.\textsuperscript{63}

The official goals of this intervention articulated by Putin were ‘establishing a legitimate power in Syria and creating the conditions for political compromise’.\textsuperscript{64} On the one hand, there is no doubt that al-Assad’s position significantly improved due to the support provided by the Kremlin. On the other, it seems too simplistic to assume that rescuing al-Assad was the main strategic goal of the Kremlin in its first large-scale overt military deployment outside the post-Soviet space since the end of the Cold War.

From the beginning of Russia’s intervention in Syria, experts interpreted the Kremlin’s true intentions differently. Some argued that Russia’s decision to send its troops on a foreign adventure was shaped by the fact that Damascus was ‘effectively the only ally which Russia has in the region’ and ‘it is very important [to Russia] to preserve this \textit{platsdarm} [bridgehead] in the region’.\textsuperscript{65} Others argued Putin’s decision was ‘a way out of the isolation he and Russia have endured since the West imposed sanctions over Ukraine—with the added bonus of wagging an “I told you so” finger at the White House’.\textsuperscript{66}

This plethora of interpretations not only suggests the existence of SA around the Kremlin’s decision to intervene in Syria, it also perfectly fits into the conceptual framework of Russia’s IW, suggesting that this SA was created deliberately. By examining Russia’s intervention through the prism of IW, it is possible to claim that all these interpretations

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), ‘Russian Airstrikes in 2022: Nearly 4,000 Airstrikes Kill and Injure 414 ISIS Members in Syrian Desert’, 9 January 2023 [accessed 6 April 2023].
\item \textsuperscript{64} Interfax Staff, ‘Putin nazval osnovnuyu zadachu rossiyskih voennykh v Sirii’ [Putin Declared the Main Task of the Russian Military in Syria], Interfax, 11 October 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].
\item \textsuperscript{65} Igor Sutyagin, ‘RUSI Experts Igor Sutyagin and Michael Stephens Assess the Reasons and Prospects of Russia’s Military Campaign against Daesh/ISIS’, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 1 October 2015, Facebook, video; Payam Mohseni (ed.), Disrupting the Chessboard Perspectives on the Russian Intervention in Syria (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2015).
\item \textsuperscript{66} Neil MacFarquhar and Andrew E. Kramer, ‘Putin Sees Path to Diplomacy through Syria’, New York Times, 17 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].
\end{itemize}
were the Kremlin’s objectives. The military objective to save al-Assad’s power was only a direct tactical objective in pursuit of indirect larger operational goals—undermining the US/EU/NATO internal cohesion and ability to exercise their SC in the Middle East. Moreover, by shaping
the tactical situation on the ground, the Kremlin was able to influence the three main target audiences of its IW, trying to shift and shape (as well as disrupt) the global order to benefit Russia’s geopolitical situation.

If the only goal were to maintain al-Assad’s regime, Moscow could have continued to provide diplomatic protection in the UN Security Council, as well as military hardware. However, in the summer of 2015 the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, convinced Putin ‘that if Syria falls, Russia will have no value in the eyes of the West’.67 Therefore, it seems right to assume that the Kremlin’s decision to intervene was driven less by its desire to ‘provide comprehensive assistance to the legitimate government of Syria’,68 and more by its understanding of how this particular military action could shape tactical, operational, and, in turn, geopolitical situations to favour the Kremlin’s direction.

Analysed through the prism of IW, Russia’s intervention in Syria was not only a military operation, but also a well-staged manoeuvre in the information domain, aimed at three main target audiences (Figure 3).

The first was the US/EU/NATO. One of the main lessons learnt by Russia during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War was that the concept of IW should be based on

| a fusion of political public relations, the coordinated use of public and traditional diplomacy resources, the creation of a robust strategic communications structure to support national interests, and the means to fulfil them not only at a tactical and strategic level but internationally to shape and drive the global public opinion.69 |

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68 Putin, in Washington Post Staff, ‘Read Putin’s U.N. General Assembly Speech’.
With the poor record of Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan in the background, and the general political stalemate in the fight against Islamic State, Putin’s call for an international coalition was nothing less than a skilfully executed performance: ‘similar to the anti-Hitler coalition, it could unite a broad range of forces that are resolutely resisting those who, just like the Nazis, sow evil and hatred of humankind’. This rhetoric, combined with no less theatrical military actions, was met with overwhelming approval by the Western public. In one YouGov poll, 77 per cent of British people supported forming a common front involving Russia to fight the Islamic State, whereas in another YouGov poll, 54 per cent of American correspondents approved cooperation between the American and Russian forces fighting the Islamic State. It was probably the first time (possibly the last) in modern history that a deployment of Russian armed forces abroad enjoyed such vast public support in the West. Not only did this support last for a significant period (according to another YouGov poll in April 2017, 50 per cent of American correspondents were in favour of US–Russia cooperation in fighting ISIS), it fitted well into the Kremlin’s operational objective to undermine US/EU/NATO internal cohesion at a time when the West was still trying to build solidarity against Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the crisis in eastern Ukraine.

The second important target audience was Russia’s strategic partners in general, and China in particular. From the very beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, China and Russia had expressed joint support for al-Assad’s government. On the one hand, China and Russia held different immediate objectives in Syria: as Moscow sought to ensure al-Assad’s political survival, Beijing was less invested in it. On the other hand, the overall strategies of both converged in terms of preventing Western-led regime change in the country, while showcasing the unreliability of the US as a security guarantor in the region and satisfying competing

70 Putin, in Washington Post Staff, ‘Read Putin’s U.N. General Assembly Speech’.
72 Peter Moore, ‘Most Americans Support Co-operating with the Russian Military to Fight ISIS’, YouGov America, 6 October 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].
regional powers by bringing an end to the war. Therefore, the Kremlin’s military intervention not only helped to promote these mutual objectives, it also sent an important message to Beijing, as ‘from China’s perspective, Russian military intervention against IS in Syria and the perceived unreliability of the United States has led to the view that cooperation with Russia offers greater strategic value’.74

The final target audience was the RoW. On the regional level, this intervention sent an important message across the Middle East, boosting the Kremlin’s relations with all sides of the region’s bitter rivalries: Iran and Israel, the Kurds and Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.75 On the global level, the Kremlin’s military intervention was a decisive and carefully staged performance of silver rockets, brave soldiers, shiny hardware, and classic concerts in liberated cities,76 intended ‘to recruit geographically distant nations as partners in constructing a new multipolar, anti-U.S. world order’—something that significantly improved Russia’s foothold (at the expense of Western positions) in Venezuela and across different African countries, including Mali, the Central African Republic, and Sudan.77

In other words, Russia’s military actions in Syria were just as (if not more) successful in serving the objectives of IW by shifting and shaping (and mainly disrupting) global order for its benefit as it was in achieving the direct tactical military goal of the intervention—securing al-Assad’s regime. Despite extensive opposition from Germany, the EU, and the US, by 2021 the World Health Organization had appointed Syria to its executive board, Interpol had readmitted Syria to its network, and Algeria and Egypt had pushed to reinvite Syria to Arab League membership, while other Arab nations have since gestured towards a

75 Economist Staff, ‘Vladimir Putin’s Road to Damascus: Russia’s Military Gamble in Syria is Paying off Handsomely’, Economist, 12 May 2009 [accessed 4 April 2023].
76 Fred Pleitgen, ‘Russian Orchestra Plays Concert in Ancient Syrian Ruins of Palmyra’, CNN, 6 May 2016 [accessed 4 April 2023].
rapprochement with President al-Assad. And for Russia, the benefits of this intervention strengthened its cooperation with China and its ability to exercise influence in Africa and the Middle East, not only by reminding everyone concerned that Russia is ‘Great Again’ but also by undermining the credibility of the West (the US/EU/NATO).

The 2022 War in Ukraine and Information War

Unlike the 2015 intervention in Syria, the Kremlin’s decision to invade Ukraine on 22 February 2022 was forewarned. The US intelligence community had sounded the alert about Russia’s plans to invade well in advance. Yet, the invasion still caught many by surprise. The most prominent state was Germany, where ‘Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine [...] proved to be a painful wake-up call’. While the official goals of the so-called ‘special military operation’ have been ‘to demilitarize and de-nazify Ukraine’, even Putin’s address that launched the invasion implied much broader geopolitical objectives for the Kremlin’s military activity in Ukraine. While on the tactical level the Kremlin was seeking, as military analyst Michael Kofman put it, ‘regime change in Ukraine’ to solve the problem of Ukraine’s increasing alienation from Russia and alignment with the West on the geopolitical level, he proposed that Moscow had a greater goal in mind, ‘the revision of Europe’s security order’.

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80 Stefan Meister, ‘Germany’s Role and Putin’s Escalation Dominance in Ukraine’, Wilson Center, 5 April 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
81 Vladimir Putin, ‘Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossii k Federatsii’ [Address of the President of the Russian Federation], 24 February 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
82 Michael Kofman, ‘Michael Kofman, an Expert on Russia’s Armed Forces, Explains Why the Kremlin Will Seek Regime Change in Ukraine’, Economist, 23 February 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
83 Michael Kofman, ‘Putin’s Wager in Russia’s Standoff with the West’, War on the Rocks, 24 January 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
Kofman’s observation about the Kremlin’s goals makes sense, as undermining NATO (‘the instrument of the foreign policy of the United States’, according to Putin) would ultimately lead to ‘a revised European order’. Yet, if undermining NATO were the Kremlin’s only strategic goal, then Russia could simply maintain its military build-up on Ukraine’s border without further kinetic actions, as doing so ‘costs almost nothing and brings enormous political benefits’. Every military exercise, every movement, every new deployment would continue to amplify divisions between Eastern European countries which were fearful of invasion; Germany, France, and some other Western European countries that were inclined towards reconciliation with Russia; and the United States, which was busy with its domestic problems and preoccupied with countering China. In other words, it seems that by deciding on invasion, the Kremlin had in mind a greater set of objectives than just trying to undermine NATO’s internal cohesion and resilience.

This plethora of interpretations not only suggests the existence of SA around the Kremlin’s decision to invade Ukraine, it also perfectly fits into the conceptual framework of Russia’s IW, indicating that this SA was created deliberately. Despite the fact that the war in Ukraine is still ongoing and it is difficult to offer an accurate analysis, the conceptual framework of IW can help to shed light on the different objectives that the Kremlin has been trying to achieve (Figure 4).

By analysing military developments on the ground, one might assume that the war has not gone according to the Kremlin’s plan. Yet, when asked about the setbacks in his ‘special military operation’, Putin’s usual response is ‘we are proceeding according to plan’. While his answer can be easily dismissed as a delusion, an examination of Russia’s military

84 Putin, ‘Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii’.
85 Kofman, ‘Putin’s Wager in Russia’s Standoff with the West’.
86 Ofer Fridman and Vera Michlin-Shapir, ‘Smoke and Mirrors: Western Misperceptions of Russia in Ukraine’, Institute of Modern Russia, 11 February 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
87 Ibid.
actions in Ukraine through the prism of IW suggests, as senior Kremlin officials repeat, that Russia might, indeed, be pursuing its objectives ‘according to plan’.\textsuperscript{90} The concept of IW is based on the idea that military actions are conducted not necessarily in pursuit of direct tactical goals

\textsuperscript{90} Dmitri Peskov quoted in ‘Peskov: Spetsoperatsiya na Ukrainе idet po planu’ [Peskov: Special Operation in Ukraine Goes According to Plan], Gazeta.ru, 4 July 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
on the battlefield, but for their potential to influence target audiences that are not directly involved in the conflict. In other words, from this perspective, insofar as the war produces the Kremlin’s desired influence on its target audiences, it achieves its strategic objectives, regardless of the heavy losses in personnel and equipment on the ground.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, much like in the 2015 intervention in Syria, the primary target audience of the Kremlin’s IW has been the US/EU/NATO. However, unlike in 2015, the Kremlin did not try to curry favourable opinion with the Western public or justify Russia’s military actions. Instead, building on existing political, economic, and cultural discord between different members of the EU and NATO, Russia’s strategic objective was to undermine the resilience and cohesion among those members. Hence, undermining NATO was the goal, and invading Ukraine was ‘a means to achieve this goal’.91

Neither the EU nor NATO reacted as the Kremlin anticipated. Instead, the collective West succeeded in showcasing unity and resolve in the face of Russian military aggression. Alarmed by the rumble of Russian artillery echoing just across Poland’s eastern border, NATO not only approved the admission of Sweden and Finland into the alliance, but also dramatically transformed its posture, conducting ‘the biggest overhaul of our collective deterrence and defence since the Cold War’.92 As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg put it: ‘President Putin wanted less NATO. He is getting more NATO.’93

It is easy to see NATO’s reaction in the Kremlin’s failure to undermine the alliance. Instead of undermining NATO, it helped the alliance unify itself against Russia. Nevertheless, Russia’s consistent decisions to prolong the war and extend its aims in Ukraine94 demonstrate that the Kremlin believes NATO’s unity is temporary, as the economic and

91 Fridman and Michlin-Shapir, ‘Smoke and Mirrors’.
93 Jens Stoltenberg, ‘Pre-Summit Press Conference’, NATO, 1 June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
political consequences of this war will reverse this process in the long run. A policy brief produced by the European Council on Foreign Relations in June 2022 stated that ‘as the conflict in Ukraine turns into a long war of attrition, it risks becoming the key dividing line in Europe’. The Kremlin understands this as well, extending the war regardless of the costs and believing that despite short-term setbacks, the long-term economic consequences and internal political divisions around the war will help to achieve the operational objective of undermining the US/EU/NATO.

The second main target audience of the war in Ukraine includes Russia’s strategic partners in general, and China in particular. China has already been at odds with the West, especially the US, for several years. The Russian invasion of Ukraine presented a significant strategic challenge to the Chinese leadership, forcing it to take a side. While on the diplomatic level it has been an enormous success for the Kremlin, as China blamed NATO for the war and protested against Western sanctions on Russia, in reality Beijing ‘did not match its words with deeds’, generally complying with Western sanctions and refusing to provide military support to Russia. However, from the perspective of IW, this does not undermine the Kremlin’s success in forging stronger relations with China, even if they are based not on a genuine strategic partnership, but on mutual disregard for the West. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Chinese public has grown even more negative about the US, more positive about Russia, and more confident about China. The success of the Kremlin’s IW is not only that Russia is ‘the most positively perceived country’ in China, but also that the United States is commonly thought of as a ‘powerful state, yet hostile to China, untrustworthy, and having a tendency to interfere in other countries’ affairs’. These feelings already manifested themselves during the

96 Zhuoran Li, China’s Diplomatic Campaign Following Russia’s Ukraine Invasion, Diplomat, 17 June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
97 Richard Q. Turcsanyi et al., Chinese Views of the US and Russia after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), May 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
98 Ibid.
visit by Chinese president Xi Jinping to Russia in March 2023, which offered ‘a symbolic shot in the arm to his increasingly isolated Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin’, and highlighted ‘Xi’s determination to push back against American power in the world’. The Kremlin’s decision to invade Ukraine sent an important message that resonates with China’s own view of the world, and the Kremlin bets that it is only a matter of time before Beijing becomes more proactive.

The final target audience of the Kremlin’s IW is the RoW, where the purpose of the war in Ukraine has been to undermine Western relations with many nonaligned countries, especially in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. While some Western experts believe that, in their reaction to the Russian invasion, ‘the US and the EU have, in effect, divided the world up’, this is hardly the case. The rest of the world reacted to US president Joe Biden’s call for ‘a brighter future rooted in democracy and principle, hope and light, of decency and dignity, of freedom and possibilities’ with much cynicism, as ‘many countries do not side with Ukraine and its democratic hopes’. Chandran Nair, the founder of the Global Institute for Tomorrow in Hong Kong, explained this in the following way:

Reactions to events in Ukraine have revealed to the wider world a deep-seated Western superiority, particularly with regards to the lesser value of non-Western lives and the right to intervene in other countries. Now, the non-Western world is refusing to accept the West’s selective sense of morality, and this is perhaps the biggest shift arising from the tragedy in Ukraine.

101 Joe Biden, ‘Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World to Support the People of Ukraine’, Warsaw, 26 March 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
102 Charai, ‘New World Disorder’.
103 Chandran Nair, ‘Wars Are Only Evil When Westerners Are the Victims’, Nikkei Asia, 18 March 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
In Asia many countries, ‘including big democracies like India and Indonesia, are reluctant to criticize Russia openly’, as their political calculus is ‘dictated first by cold calculations of interests, with values coming a distant second’. The same applies to the Middle East countries, including traditional American allies, where ‘self-interest and fence-sitting prevail’. In Africa, which has long been a target of Russia’s information operations, twenty-six of fifty-four countries did not vote in favour of the UN resolution that condemned Russia’s aggression in Ukraine in March 2023. The war in Ukraine has not had the same positive effect on Russian relations with these countries as the 2015 intervention in Syria. However, it successfully amplified their mistrust of the West, feeding into African countries’ growing resentment at the ‘way the US behaved in its unipolar moment’, the increasing ‘reservations about democracy as a system of governance’ among Arab countries, and the difficulty of Asian countries navigating their way in the context of growing rivalry between global powers.

Russia’s military actions in Ukraine did not go as planned on the ground. However, it has been quite successful in fulfilling its strategic objective of IW—shifting and shaping (as well as disrupting) global order. In Putin’s mind the most geopolitically important strategic goal of this war has been to build a new world order. Regardless of when, where, and how the guns fall silent, the world is not going to be the same, which implies that, despite the tactical military failure, the war in Ukraine

104 Economist Staff, ‘Interests, Not Values, Underpin Asia’s Ambivalence about Russia’, Economist, 23 April 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
106 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Mapping Disinformation in Africa, 26 April 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
107 Abraham White and Leo Holtz, ‘Figure of the Week: African Countries’ Votes on the UN Resolution Condemning Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine’, Brookings, 9 March 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
108 Economist Staff, ‘Nostalgia and Kalashnikovs’.
110 Economist Staff, ‘Interests, Not Values’.
111 Stanovaya, ‘Putin Thinks He’s Winning’.
112 Vera Michlin-Shapir and Ofer Fridman, The Seismic Effects of the War in Ukraine, Jerusalem Strategic Tribune, June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].
has already achieved the Kremlin’s strategic objective. According to the concept of pyrrhic victory, one can win all the battles but still lose the war. In IW, however, the outcome of the battles does not matter, so long as they achieve the desired impact on the targeted audiences (the US/EU/NATO, Russia’s strategic partners, and the RoW). Russia may lose all its battles in Ukraine, but its strategic goal of changing the global order has already been achieved (even if, in the end, it will not be to the Kremlin’s benefit).

The examination of the 2015 intervention in Syria and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine clearly demonstrate the inherent SA of the Kremlin’s IW. Any deployment of military forces requires a declared official goal. In Syria it was ‘establishing a legitimate power in Syria and creating the conditions for political compromise’; in Ukraine, ‘to demilitarize and de-nazify Ukraine’. However, when examined through the prism of the Kremlin’s IW, it seems that both sought to achieve a completely different strategic goal of shaping and shifting global order. Moreover, while the declared tactical goals were pursued by overt military means, the strategic goals were pursued by far less tangible influence on the target audiences (the US/EU/NATO, Russia’s strategic partners, and the RoW).

It is important to emphasise that both tactical and strategic goals of these military actions never were a secret. The former were formally articulated with the beginning of the hostilities. The latter can be easily deduced from Russian official documents and speeches by Kremlin officials. Yet, both operations created significant SA about the Kremlin’s ends, means, and ways, as the Kremlin has never officially connected the dots between its strategic, operational, and tactical objectives and the means to achieve them, leaving as much ground for diverse interpretation as possible.

While the concept of IW has never been articulated in any official document, manual, or doctrine, it makes sense of Russian strategy by identifying consistencies between the Kremlin’s words and deeds.

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113 Interfax Staff, ‘Putin nazval osnovnuyu zadachu rossiyskikh voyennykh v Sirii’.
114 Putin, ‘Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoj Federatsii’. 
assuming a degree of long-term comprehensive planning. This assumption is rooted in a traditional approach to strategy that sees it as a combination of ‘calculation and control to effect planned movement over a predictable but fast-moving environment in order to realize well-designed aims’.\(^{115}\)

Taking into consideration the fact that Putin is frequently characterised as ‘astrategic’ or a ‘tactical’ player who is ‘adept at short-term tactical responses to setbacks, but less talented at long-term strategy’,\(^{116}\) it might well be that the concept of IW is a product of retrospective sense-making, and Russia’s strategy is based on a completely different modus operandi.

### Strategy without Design and Strategic Ambiguity in the Kremlin Strategic Communications

Modern Westerners, argues cultural psychologist Richard E. Nisbett, ‘like the ancient Greeks, see the world in analytic, atomistic terms; they see objects as discrete and separate from their environments; they see events as moving in linear fashion when they move at all; and they feel themselves to be personally in control’.\(^{117}\) Consequently it is not surprising that the Western approach to strategy is dominated by the notion of linear progression towards long-term objectives defined in advance, as Western ‘institutionalized habits focus only upon analytic and linear models’.\(^{118}\)

Describing the cognitive characteristics of Western society, Nisbett observes that ‘the individualistic or independent nature of Western society seems consistent with the Western focus on particular objects in isolation from their context’.\(^{119}\) In other words, instead of focusing on the system as a situational whole, Western strategists tend to disaggregate

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119 Nisbett, *Geography of Thought*, p. xvii.
issues into separate boxes/elements, ‘in a belief that once they develop a fundamental understanding of the system’s “building-blocks,” they can then aggregate them and understand the system as a whole’. The above proposed concept of the Kremlin’s IW seems to do exactly that—it approaches the systemic whole of the Kremlin’s system of communication (the Kremlin’s SC) by deconstructing it into ‘building-blocks’ of ends, means, and ways, and reaggregating them into the concept of IW.

This analytical view of the world that deconstructs complexity into simple and explicit models has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, Western ‘simple models’, Nisbett argues, ‘are the most useful ones […] because they are easier to disprove and consequently to improve upon’. On the other, they ‘tend to be limited too sharply to the goal object and its properties, slighting the possible role of context.’

This tendency to disaggregate complex and interconnected reality into clearly identified boxes was best demonstrated by the American strategic approach of compartmentalising four distinctive instruments of power—DIME (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic). When this disaggregation struggled to address the complexity of the twenty-first century, American strategists created ‘new acronyms such as MIDFIELD (military, informational, diplomatic, financial, intelligence, economic, law, and development) [which] convey a much broader array of options for the [strategy-] and policymaker to use.’ However, even this extended categorisation did not survive the test of reality, as the number of possible instruments of power is defined by those who create and use them, and not by idealised bins of American strategists. For example, neither DIME nor MIDFIELD includes social order or religion, despite the fact that both (tribal system and Islam)

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121 Nisbett, *Geography of Thought*, p. 134.
were harvested as instruments of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Russia has been employing the latter (the Orthodox Church) as an instrument of power in pursuit of its political objectives.

This leads back to the concept of IW presented above. Its main advantage is that, based on the Western logic of strategy-making as a process driven by clearly defined long-term goals, it identifies a consistent pattern in Russia’s actions and, therefore, helps to understand them and counteract them when necessary. Its disadvantage, however, is its failure to take into consideration that the Russian strategic mindset works differently from the Western one.

The Russian traditional approach to strategy differs from the Western one in two interconnected fundamental aspects. The first is that the Western traditional disaggregation of strategy into ends, means, and ways has never found supporters in Russia. Instead, in the Russian mindset, strategy has always remained an art of combining different elements to achieve desired goals in the specific context of a given situation. ‘All great commanders’, argued General of Artillery Baron Nikolai Medem in 1836, ‘were truly great because they based their actions not on pre-drafted rules, but on a skilful combination of all means and circumstances.’ Almost a hundred years later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Major General Aleksandr Svechin confirmed this understanding, stating that ‘strategy is an art of combining.’ A century on, in the early twenty-first century, Major General Aleksandr Vladimirov argues that

129 Fridman, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, p. 4.
‘national strategy is [a combination of] the theory, practice, and art of governing a state’.\textsuperscript{132}

The second fundamental difference between Russia’s traditional approach to strategy-making and its Western counterpart is the importance of the prevailing situation. ‘There are no laws (rules) that suit every possible occasion,’ argued General of Infantry Genrikh Leer in 1869, ‘because the number of possible occasions is infinite.’\textsuperscript{133} Thirty years later Lieutenant General Yevgeniy Martynov continued in the same vein, arguing that ‘the methods of strategic art usually change with the appearance of a new situation’.\textsuperscript{134}

From imperial Russia, through the Soviet Union, to contemporary Russia, strategy has always been understood as an art of finding the best way out of the specific context of a given situation.\textsuperscript{135} This approach to strategy-making was best articulated by the founding father of the Russian strategic school, Genrikh Leer, according to whom the main goal of strategy is ‘to grasp the question of waging war at a given moment in all its aspects and solve it according to the prevailing situation, i.e., to define a reasonable goal and direct all forces and means towards its achievement in the shortest time and with the least sacrifices’.\textsuperscript{136} If this is the inspiration behind contemporary Russian strategy, accusing the Kremlin of astrategic behaviour makes no sense, as it is built on an entirely different approach. While the Western traditional approach assumes strategy to be an act of \textit{navigation} (towards long-term predefined goals), the Russian approach seems to see strategy as an act of \textit{wayfinding} (finding the best possible ‘reasonable’ solution to the current situation).

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{134} Yevgeniy Martynov, \textit{Strategiya v epokhu Napoleona i v nashe vremya} [Strategy in the Age of Napoleon and in Our Times] (St Petersburg: Voyennaya Tipografiya, 1894), p. 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{135} Fridman, ‘Russian Mindset and War’.
  \item \textsuperscript{136} Leer, ‘Experience of Historical-Critical Research’, p. 39.
\end{itemize}
In analysing this disparity between the dominant conceptual approach to strategy, as an act of navigation, and a less acknowledged approach to strategy as an act of wayfinding, Robert C.H. Chia and Robin Holt coined the latter as ‘strategy without design’. Namely, ‘a latent and retrospectively identifiable consistency in the pattern of actions taken that produces desirable outcomes even though no one had intended or deliberately planned for it to be so’.

According to them, in complex environments ‘strategy and consistency of actions can emerge non-deliberately through a profusion of local interventions directed towards dealing with immediate concerns’, as ‘attending to and dealing with the problems, obstacles, and concerns confronted in the here and now may actually serve to clarify and shape the initially vague and inarticulate aspirations behind such coping actions with sufficient consistency that, in retrospect, they may appear to constitute a recognisable “strategy”’. 

The idea that the Russian traditional approach to strategy-making as an act of wayfinding by dealing with immediate concerns (rather than navigating towards a predefined outcome) offers several important insights into the nature and character of the Kremlin’s SC.

First, the concept presented above and case studies of IW that followed are a misleading attempt to rationalise the Kremlin’s actions within a linear and confined model of end-means, alien to Russian traditional strategy-making. From that perspective, the main driver behind the Kremlin’s decision to intervene in Syria was the context of the particular circumstances in summer 2015, rather than the Kremlin’s desire to make Russia great again by shifting and shaping the global order. In the Kremlin’s interpretation of the prevailing situation in the summer of 2015, it was decided that the best possible solution was to conduct a military intervention in Syria. The rest (long-term strategic goals of influencing target audiences) were vague and inarticulate aspirations, none of which were deliberately planned. The same applies to the war in Ukraine. From the perspective of strategy without design, the order

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138 Ibid., p. 5.
to invade Ukraine was issued because the Kremlin believed that it was the best possible solution for the local, regional, and global situation (as the Kremlin perceived it) on 24 February 2022. Any other goals of this invasion were simple aspirations, none of which were planned for by the Kremlin. The concept of IW might be helpful for the Western strategist by rationalising the Kremlin’s actions. However, it is misleading, as it assumes that Russians navigate towards a predefined endgame, while they simply try to find their way out of the situation they are in, again and again. While in the West it might be perceived as pure opportunism, it is simply rooted in a different interpretation of what strategy is. In other words, Russia’s strategic communications are rooted not in the Western understanding of strategy as an act of navigation, but in the Russian traditional approach to strategy as an act of wayfinding.

This leads to two roles of SA in Russia’s SC. First, the discrepancy between the Western and Russian approaches to strategy creates inherent SA about the Kremlin’s goals, means, and ways. In its attempt to communicate (both by words and deeds) the Kremlin is driven by an attempt to grasp the problem of a given moment in all its aspects and solve it according to the prevailing situation, without giving too much consideration to the long-term desired ends. Yet, Western strategists try to interpret Kremlin’s communications as something driven by a long-term aspiration, as any Western strategy should. This divergence serves as a fruitful ground for facilitating SA about the Kremlin’s SC.

The second role of SA in Russia’s SC is more inherent and important. Russia’s bottom-up SC, driven by the context of the situation in which it is conducted, rather than Western top-down SC driven by long-term predefined and clearly articulated goals, is inherently ambiguous. Strategic communicators that operate according to strategy without design are freer to make a variety of decisions. Some of these seem contradictory or dispersed. But all help to find a way out of the situation towards a more flexible long-term goal because they are vague and inarticulate. This type of SC might not be to the taste of the Western strategic communicators,
but they might find there useful inspiration, especially when dealing with adversaries who conceptualise strategy differently.

Conclusion: Inherent Strategic Ambiguity between Objectives and Actions in Strategic Communications

On the one hand, the interpretation of Russian SC as IW with its long-term strategic goals and pre-planned and predefined desired effects on the target audiences helps to make sense out of the Kremlin’s behaviour, by identifying consistencies between its words and actions. On the other, it is difficult to ignore that this conceptualisation contradicts not only Russia’s traditional approach to strategy, but also the practice of strategy-making, which, according to Lawrence Freedman, is ‘fluid and flexible, governed by the starting point and not the end point’, as it evolves ‘through a series of states, each one not quite what was anticipated or hoped for, requiring a reappraisal and modification of the original strategy, including ultimate objectives’. In other words, strategy in practice is rarely an act of navigation towards goals set in advance.

While both of these interpretations offer almost opposite explanations, a dialectic interaction between them offers interesting and complex observations of the inherent SA between objectives and actions in SC. SC based on the idea of navigation towards pre-identified objectives offers a clear sense of direction, but suffers from lacking situational awareness. It struggles to comprehensively and coherently address the way our adversary’s SC shapes and shifts our SC—from how we define our objectives to how they are translated into words, images, and actions. After all, SC is an interactive dance between (at least) two strategic communicators (as it occurs in ‘a contested environment’), and everyone involved gets a say in how we proceed and towards what goals.

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140 Bolt and Leonie, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*, p. 46.
SC based on the idea of finding a way out of a prevailing situation better suits the reality of strategy-making, but suffers from opportunism and a lack of overall direction. After all, as Neville Bolt argues, ‘for strategic communicators, something is strategic when it focuses on the long term; competes in a dynamic environment; and sets out to achieve discernible and pre-identified effects from an actual, not idealised starting-point’.141

Strategy, according to Freedman, is turning ‘a developing situation into a desirable outcome’.'142 'Developing' implies not only that one has to have desired outcomes, but also that these might change, depending on the developing situation. Therefore, strategic communicators do not have to choose between the strategy of navigating or the strategy of wayfinding. Instead, they must constantly be aware that their words and actions not only navigate towards a predefined goal, but also find a way through a series of situations that are shaped by all other strategic communicators involved in the process (friends and foes alike). It is important to treat desired outcomes as aspiration, rather than as clearly defined goals to be achieved—an identifiable narrative that offers a sense of direction and retrospectively identifiable consistency, rather than a direct and single-minded pursuit of long-term strategic goals. And this requires a great deal of strategic ambiguity between the objectives and actions in SC.

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